

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND THE PRIEST

By GERARD W. HUGHES

IF ASKED ‘Do you consider receiving regular spiritual direction to be important in the life of a priest?’, diocesan bishops and religious provincials are unlikely to answer, ‘No, and that is why I have never made provision for it in my diocese/congregation’. Yet I do not know of any diocese or religious order which, until very recent years, made any serious provision for regular spiritual direction for its priests, or provided any specialized training for spiritual directors. For years men would study to qualify as lecturers in canon law, moral or dogmatic theology, and seminarians would spend six or seven years learning from these men as part of their preparation for priesthood. Spiritual directors, however, had no such training, and spirituality, the source of all theology, if treated at all, was given a very minor place. In my own four years study of theology we had one course (I think it lasted for one semester) called ‘ascetical theology’. The weekly session was nicknamed ‘Holy Hour’, looked upon as a period of light relaxation and, because there was no examination at the end of it, many of us did not bother to attend.

In most seminaries and religious houses of studies there would be a man with the title ‘spiritual father’. Arrangements might differ from place to place, but I think it is fair to say that usually men were appointed to such a post when they no longer had the energy for anything else. They were chosen for their piety and friendliness rather than any gift of learning or skill in discernment. Consequently, spiritual direction was experienced as a minor chore to be endured in order to keep the old boy happy rather than as a time of clarification, enlightenment and encouragement. My own memories of many years of such spiritual direction can be reduced in their essential content to a few brief questions and answers:

Himself: Well now, how are you?

Myself: Fine thanks, Father.

Himself: Well, that’s good. And the prayer — how are you finding the prayer?

Myself: I try, but I don’t have much success. My mind runs all over the place.

Himself: Yes, we all find it difficult, but the most important thing is that you persevere and keep praying. Nobody can pretend it’s easy.

The essentials were then over. The remainder of the time would be spent in discussion, the topic depending on the spiritual father of that time. It might be sport, or a little bit of house gossip, or, in one case, the role of the machine-gunner in the major battles of the Great War, in which Father had served as a sergeant! There was one occasion when I told the spiritual father that I was being tormented with doubts about faith. I have never forgotten his reaction. 'Oh my God', he exclaimed, and then asked me if I was sure that I had not been neglecting prayer. It took me many years and much pain before I was able to understand what was happening in these doubts. A good spiritual director would have shown no sign of shock and could have let me talk freely about what I was experiencing, thus helping me to see the difficulties as an invitation to grow in faith.

The art of spiritual direction had been lost and in its place was a benevolent system for checking up on student priests to see that they were 'doing' their spiritual duties and that they had someone to talk to if they had difficulties of conscience. It is not surprising that bishops and provincials did not consider spiritual direction to be of any great importance.

In recent years there are signs of a growing awareness of the need for spiritual direction not only for priests and religious, but for every Christian. In their enthusiasm, its advocates tend to exaggerate its value. 'Absolutely vital', 'essential for anyone who is serious about the spiritual life', 'every priest should have a spiritual director'. The problem is that when someone asks, 'Excuse me Father, but I live in "X"'. Could you recommend any spiritual director within twenty miles?', the usual answer is 'No, sorry, I can't', with the more optimistic person adding, 'but I'm sure if you look around you'll find someone eventually'. If having a spiritual director is presented as necessary for salvation, then most of the present generation of priests must resign themselves to being deprived of such means within their own lifetime!

A further question arises when talking with people who have had regular spiritual direction in their lives. I reckon that if I had kept careful record of all the conversations, I could produce a useful thesis entitled 'Spiritual Nemesis', corresponding to Ivan Illich's 'Medical Nemesis', maintaining that, often, people would have been better off if they had not had a spiritual director. The director is a very privileged person, who is allowed into the recesses of another's mind and heart. Of all the mechanisms of man and of nature, the human psyche is by far the most delicate. To blunder around insensitively with the hobnailed boots of general moral judgments and pious aphorisms can be as damaging as letting a butcher try his hand at a transplant. Enormous damage can be done through clumsy spiritual direction.

Is it, then, that bishops and provincials have been wise and prudent in not providing regular spiritual direction for the majority of their clergy? Certainly, poor spiritual direction can be a waste of time and even very damaging, but a much greater danger is not to have it at all. Its absence affects not only priests, but above all ordinary people who are still so dependent on priests for spiritual guidance.

Why is it so important to encourage priests to have spiritual direction? Why should it be a first priority in every diocese to ensure that there are suitable people trained as directors? The answer, briefly, is this — in order that the Church may be the Church of Christ and may not lapse into idolatry. It is the most urgent and yet unrecognized need in the Church today.

‘That the Church may not lapse into idolatry’. Surely, the Church can never lapse into idolatry, for Christ has promised that the gates of hell shall never prevail against it. And yet shortly after Christ had appointed Peter as the Rock on which the Church was to be built for all time, he foretold his death, and Peter, full of good will and affection for Christ, said, ‘This must not happen to you’. Christ turned to him and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan. You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God’s way but man’s’. The gospel hands down this story to be pondered by the future Church. If it was possible for honest, friendly, devoted, courageous Peter to speak with the mind of Satan, there is no reason to suppose that the rest of us — bishops, provincials and priests — should not individually and corporately do the same.

The danger to the Church is not so much that she should suddenly turn into a morally depraved organization, spawning wicked Borgias in the Vatican, but rather that she might succumb to a temptation — the blindness of the scribes and pharisees. The difficulty about spiritual blindness is that we do not recognize it when we have it. For example, a priest may be a key man within his diocese or Order, most conscientious and hard working, on every major committee, the builder of many churches, and an obvious candidate for a bishopric, and yet not be a living cell within the Body of Christ. It is not that this key man has abandoned his ‘priestly way of life’ and is living a life of debauchery on the quiet. He is far too busy for debauchery, is as sober as a judge, as chaste as an angel, as reliable as the diocesan electronic clock, and yet working out of a quite ‘worldly’ wisdom. St Paul warned the Colossians against an asceticism based on the principles of this world:

If you have really died with Christ to the principles of this world, why do you still let rules dictate to you, as though you were still

living in the world? 'It is forbidden to pick up this, it is forbidden to taste that, it is forbidden to touch something else'; all these prohibitions are only concerned with things which perish by their very use — an example of human doctrines and regulations. It may be argued that true wisdom is to be found in these, with their self-imposed devotions, their self-abasement, and their severe treatment of the body; but once the flesh starts to protest, they are no use at all.

The flesh, for St Paul, means the self which puts its own kingdom before God's kingdom. That selfish self can easily masquerade as a zealous member of Christ's kingdom, and the damage is greatest when we begin to deceive ourselves. We have to watch and pray and beg to see beneath the surface of our words and behaviour. For example statements heard frequently in any policy making group within the Church which pass as wise and prudent, and may, in fact, be so, can also manifest a loss of faith in Christ's 'seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you'. Pleas 'to proceed with caution in this matter' may indicate that fear has become the dominant factor in my life. I shall oppose anything which threatens my security — 'speaking with one voice' may mean that the Spirit of truth and justice is no longer the ultimate criterion for our decisions. There are many other examples. And so I can be considered a model priest, a man of wisdom and prudence and yet I may not be working for Christ's kingdom but for my own. This is one form of idolatry. Self idolatry within the Church as a whole may mean that as it loses touch with the Spirit of Christ, it will become increasingly preoccupied with its own survival. A Church turned in on itself will have little sense of mission, will minister to its own practising members, but will have nothing to say to those who do not belong and will make little effort to do anything for its own lapsed members. Ecumenism will be considered a fringe activity and will be looked on by most as a threat to the Church's survival. There will be little interest in theology, except to condemn those who attempt new formulations of faith in more contemporary language. Faith, having weakened, will no longer seek understanding, but will prefer to rest unthinkingly in the familiar, and justify this attitude by calling it orthodoxy. There will be great emphasis on loyalty and fidelity. Attempts to deepen understanding of the faith and to work out its implications in social and political life will be labelled secularism and condemned. There will be, as Paul says in Galatians (5,19) 'feuds and wrangling within the Church, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels, disagreements, factions and envy'. And yet people will believe that they are still working for the kingdom of God when, in fact, they are not.

We have elaborated what it means to say that spiritual direction is

necessary so that the Church may not lapse into idolatry. There are, however, some more positive reasons to which I would like to turn my attention.

What is it to be a priest? What are the essential qualities required? However we may answer these questions, no one can deny that the most essential and basic quality required in every priest is familiarity with God in prayer. The Church is the sacrament of the living Christ who lives, not in temples made of human hands, but in the minds and hearts of his people. If the Church, body of the living Christ, is not informed by the Spirit who lived in Jesus and raised him from the dead, then she is no longer the Church. 'My ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts' says the Lord God. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. The wisdom of God is folly to the world. If the priests of the Church are not attuned to the Spirit, perceptive of it and responsive to it, then they will oppose the Spirit of God. Spiritual direction is about being attuned to the Spirit of the risen Christ, becoming more perceptive and more responsive to him. If it can help us to be so attuned, obviously it is of primary importance.

There is no disagreement in the Church on the need for prayer and on the priest's need of personal prayer. But priests, while not denying the necessity of prayer, find it difficult in practice, become disheartened and, if they do keep up the practice of private prayer, tend to lapse into a mechanical recitation of the breviary or of set prayers, a duty to be done which, like beating your head against a wall, gives a sense of relief when it is over. Many priests are thoroughly confused about the nature of prayer, having had no systematic instruction on how to pray, merely repeated warnings that they must pray if they are to remain true to their vocation. They have picked up snippets of information — for example that the best form of prayer is silent, still, imageless, without thoughts. They make a great effort to be still, to empty the mind of thought and images. The effort seems to activate both mind and imagination. They are tormented with memories, images and thoughts, try to drive them away, become exhausted and emerge from their devotions in a thoroughly bad temper. Others have been told that feelings do not count and should be ignored in prayer (this is still alarmingly common teaching) — so they discount any emotional feelings which arise as mere sentimentality and try to concentrate on making acts of sheer will, an exercise which can leave them feeling very empty and dizzy. Very common is the feeling that they are not good enough to pray and that until they have overcome this or that fault there is no point in trying. This attitude is linked with the most common obstacle of all in prayer; that is, a false image of God. Our

notion of God is inevitably formed out of our own experience. Authority as experienced from parents, teachers, superiors, inevitably colours our notion of who God is. We may know intellectually that God is not to be identified with the angry parent or the ambitious and heartless headmaster intent only on results. However, the emotional effect of such authority figures and the wounds they have caused in the psyche are still effectively at work deep in our minds, often below our consciousness. They will therefore manifest themselves not in any straightforward manner, but in more devious ways of avoiding any meeting with God, for example, 'I simply do not have time for prayer — am too tired — find God more easily outside prayer'.

Good spiritual direction can free a person of many of these false notions and hang-ups about prayer, can introduce the priest to the infinite variety there is in ways of praying, can encourage him to experiment, teach him methods of praying with his whole person, not just with his mind, and help him to be still so that he can come to know the truth, that is, that there is a sense in which he does not and cannot pray: only the Spirit can pray within him. And the Spirit is the Spirit of God, the God of surprises, the God who is Other, yet nearer to us than we are to ourselves, the God who is present in every event of our lives. Good spiritual direction can help the priest to discover the value in what formerly he termed 'distractions' and to see that the most valuable source of prayer is from within his own memory, for it is in the events of our lives that God is present to us and there is no other way in which we can experience him. By talking over what he has experienced in prayer time with a spiritual director without trying to judge or assess the prayer or himself the priest will become more aware of his inner feelings and begin to notice the qualitative difference in his emotions, recognizing some as very superficial and transient, others as deeper and more genuine. This is the beginning of 'discernment of spirits', coming to recognize and distinguish the creative and the destructive movements going on within us and learning how to co-operate with the creative and to grow through the destructive movements by countering them. Learning how to discern the spirits is the first and indispensable step in discovering what God's will is for us in any particular situation. We come to know what is God's will for us by an inner sensing which, while not, of course, independent of external criteria, comes from within so that the heart and the feelings know as well as the head. Good spiritual direction can help us to discern our own inner states and through this discernment learn what God's will is for us. The spiritual director helps us to penetrate through the layers of our consciousness and to recognize our blindness and self deception.

Trahit sua quemque voluptas; 'each one is led by his own desire'. All of us, no matter how docile and obedient we may like to think ourselves, are led by our own desires and we always, in the end, do what we want. It is therefore vitally important that we should discover what we really want. Good spiritual direction can help us to get in touch with this source of our strength, the springs of everlasting life welling up within us.

Spiritual direction is the art of accompanying another person as they explore their experience in prayer. It differs from counselling in that spiritual direction takes place within a context of explicit faith and the immediate subject matter is the person's experience in prayer. The art of the spiritual director is the art of accompanying the other as he enters into his own experience, encouraging him to look at it, articulate the experience and through doing so understand better what is going on. The director's role is to help others discover for themselves, by keeping their attention focused on their own experience, because that is where they will find direction — the presence of the Holy Spirit within their own lives. It is interesting that in the *Spiritual Exercises*, a handbook meant for retreat-givers, St Ignatius does not speak of retreat directors but of 'the giver of the Exercises'. He presumes that the director is the Holy Spirit.

If priests had a better knowledge of the purpose of spiritual direction, they would be less reluctant to look for it. The more common notion of a spiritual director is of someone with penetrating eyes who can read souls (that is, know their vices and weaknesses) without having to listen to them and can then give perceptive and sound advice for the correction of their lives in the future. There are people who have this gift of seeing. Unless their vision is distorted they see the whole person, not merely the faults, and therefore see them as precious and loveable. But however accurate and penetrating their insights may be, they can do the others no good unless they can enable them to see for themselves, for it is only when this happens that any inner transformation can take place. Otherwise the effect of the far-seeing director may be to leave the person more guilt ridden, and therefore less capable of acting differently, than before.

The most essential element in spiritual direction is the trust that is built up between the director and the other. The relationship must be one of equality and the director must in no way sit in judgment on the other. That is why the old celtic name 'soul friend', or that french *accompagnateur* are preferable to 'director'. In this atmosphere of trust a person can enter his or her own consciousness and begin to learn more profoundly who God is. Unless there is an atmosphere of great trust, people will not dare to enter the dark areas of their own experience, but will do their best to ignore them or run away

from them. Unfortunately, (or fortunately, as it turns out) these dark areas will not leave us. Entering into them through prayer (meditating on sin) can be a most liberating experience, freeing us from fear, revealing to us the astonishing goodness of God who has not run away from our darkness, but entered into it and redeemed it. In the light and inner knowledge of his goodness, we can begin to see more clearly the deceptions which have been operative in us. Knowing his love and forgiveness, we do not have to be on the defensive any more or cling to false securities.

Once the priest is more at home with God in prayer, he will be more at home with himself and more at home with his people. He will experience an at-one-ness and become free of any damaging strain between his role as a priest and his being a person. He will not have to pretend or put on airs or constantly be looking over his shoulder. In Christ he will be moving to an ever greater freedom, better able to understand what is going on in his people because he has been able to enter into his own experience and has discovered that God is at work in all things, and that there is no human experience, even if it includes damage done to us by others, or damage to ourselves by our own sins, which God cannot use to draw us to himself.

From my own experience as a priest, and especially during the last seven years when I have given individual retreats to hundreds of people: priests, religious and laity, and across a mixture of christian denominations, I know that there is no shortage of men and women in the Church, a very high proportion of them laity, who are familiar with God in prayer, have a good self knowledge, sound spiritual judgment and an ability to enter into another person's experience and to accompany them unobtrusively. They could, if they were able to find the time and money for training, perform a most important and necessary ministry in the Church. I hope that this article may encourage bishops and religious superiors to recommend and finance some of their people to undergo such training.¹

¹ Fr Hughes has said that he would be happy to supply further information on training opportunities. He can be contacted at: St Beuno's, St Asaph, Clwyd, LL17 0AS, U.K.